

HESSE FLATOW

THE SYMBOLISTS: LES FLEURS DU MAL

Co-curated by Nicole Kaack and Karen Hesse Flatow

February 18 - March 20, 2021

Opening: February 18, 2021 from 4 to 8 p.m.

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HESSE FLATOW is pleased to present, *The Symbolists: Les fleurs du mal*, a group show featuring Alicia Adamerovich, Joseph Buckley, Maho Donowaki, Hilary Doyle, Clark Filio, Caroline Garcia, Eliot Greenwald, Exene Karros, Nat Meade, Tammy Nguyen, Louis Osmosis, Georgica Pettus, Johanna Robinson, Sistership TV, Alicia Smith, and Astrid Terrazas.

In the gory aftermath of the Third Republic and the 1871 Commune, the Symbolist movement of 19th-century France turned away from the scientific rationalism and Realist reportage of an industrializing age. These artists and poets, disillusioned with the banal repetition of art in their time—"copy in copy, simulation in simulation"—looked instead to the fantastical stuff of dreams, myth, and religion to reflect on the inexorable press of modernity. Symbolism originated in literature through Charles Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*, as well as the poetry of Stephane Mallarmé who famously wrote, "To name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment to be found in the poem... suggestion, that is the dream." The aesthetic was developed and expanded by artists from Gustave Moreau and Gustav Klimt to Frida Kahlo and Paul Gauguin. Esoteric in its subjectivity, the Symbolist goal was not to represent but to suggest an amorphous and affective mood, familiar but unfixed.

That past resonates with recognitions of the present—we look back into the mirrored glass of a similarly worrying reality, pinging with the delivery of new daily records and colored by the amber alerts of state curfews during protest. Challenging the escapist impulse with criticality and humor, the artists in this show are not dealing in pure abstraction, rather, finding ways to express injustice, trepidation, and hope for the future through new figures, contemporary or invented. Drawing on the symbolic material of popular culture, astrology, the internet, and beyond, this show responds to the expansion of virtual worlds which, as ever, run in tandem with reality.

Confronting the borders between perceived worlds, several works in the exhibition pose a metaphysical inquiry into the space between symbolic representation and reality. Clark Filio's *Truman Show*, drawn from the popular film of the same name, addresses the impossible moment when Truman climbs a staircase along a painted backdrop of the sky to escape the surveilled and fabricated world that has been a home and cage for his entire life. Tammy Nguyen's collaged prints play on a similar theme through the formal, syntactical, and allegorical qualities of the letter 'O' in a re-imagining of Plato's allegory of the cave. However, Hilary Doyle's *The Innocents*, Johanna Robinson's *Imagination is defined by what lies outside of it*, and Astrid Terrazas's *a fruitful being, tú rana*, suggest that there can be no such escape—reality and fiction are interchangeable, composed of the infinite imaginaries of our positionalities, desires, and dreads. Doubly representing the immensity of an ocean in a rectangle of blue pastel and the sluggish action of a fishbowl brimming with glycerin, Maho Donowaki's *I'll Swim If You Swim Too* humorously indicates the futility in the search for an unmediated reality.

Other works symbolically address social injustice and, in several cases, call attention to the prejudice veiled within unexamined icons. In performative videos where the artist's body is bruised and overwhelmed by forms of sustenance, Maho Donowaki illustrates a point of tension between gestures of care and oppression. Nat Meade's ridiculous if sympathetic portraits of stoic male figures depict the obsolescence of masculine heroism. Meanwhile, Clark Filio's *Bather* and *Paradise Lost* query how we read the allegorical nudes of historical painting today. Joseph Buckley's *George Slaying Dragon* recasts England's patron saint as an enslaved individual, rebelling and, in the process of defeating a snarling white dragon—representing, perhaps, the capitalist slaver—sending it to its death beneath the waves of the Atlantic Ocean.



Astrid Terrazas, *a fruitful being, tú rana*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas. 69 x 44 in.

In opposition to the failure of historical representative forms, the show also proposes new symbols and, with them, new worlds. Exene Karros's graphic compositions and Johanna Robinson's *Tower* collect visual resonances, tuning into the likenesses that link forms across religion, technology, and the natural world. Likewise playing on visual affinities, the gritty terrains in Eliot Greenwald's "Night Car" series are alive with the winking suggestions of grinning skylines or elementary stick-figures. And while not imbued with figurative traces like Greenwald's, Alicia Adamerovich's surreal landscapes fidget and stir with the restlessness of a sentient earth. Turning to world-building through the familiar materials of our present, Louis Osmosis's sculptures are spectacular proposals which invite the viewer to imagine the context that gave rise to such objects.

Running alongside the exhibition is a video program that further addresses the incredibly broadened field of mythologies and alternate realities that enrich our visual representational universe. Georgica Pettus's *Sekoi Fali* plays with and humanizes the monumental figures of Christianity, while Alicia Smith embodies the Nagual of Mesoamerican folk religion who can turn from human into jaguar. Honoring her mother who recently passed, Caroline Garcia's *Choose Your Fighter* seeks abstractions of solace and female wisdom through cooking shows and found footage. Finally, the episodes of Sistership TV bring together the formats of music video, sitcom, and seance in a headlong fantasy narrative.

In conjunction with *The Symbolists: Les fleurs du mal*, the gallery is also pleased to present a series of programs which will be held virtually via Zoom. Once weekly for the run of the show, curator Nicole Kaack will moderate a panel conversation with several of the participating artists. The full schedule is listed below. On March 6, Edwin Torres—a self-defined lingualisualist poet who is rooted in the languages of sight and sound—will present a selection of texts via Zoom.

In the interest of broadening accessibility at a moment when public gatherings may be dangerous to members of our public, HESSE FLATOW will present the exhibition and video program both in the gallery and in a curated viewing room online. Further, responding to the limitations to conversing around artwork that we love, we hope that the rigorous series of virtual conversations and events will reopen that space for dialogue and create opportunities for exchange between the artists and their audiences.

SCHEDULE:

Saturday, February 27 at 3PM: Conversation with artists Georgica Pettus, Louis Osmosis, and Johanna Robinson

Thursday, March 4 at 6PM: Conversation with artists Joseph Buckley, Clark Filio, Nat Meade, and Astrid Terrazas

Saturday, March 6 at 3PM: Poetry Reading by Edwin Torres

Sunday, March 14 at 3PM: Conversation with artists Eliot Greenwald, Tammy Nguyen, and Sistership TV (Katherine Kline, Emily Pelstring, Jessica Mensch)

Thursday, March 18 at 6PM: Conversation with artists Maho Donowaki, Hilary Doyle, Alicia Smith